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ABSTRACT

Schools are very sensitive to the rapid social, economic, and demographic changes that the United States is presently undergoing. They are at a disadvantage compared to most other social institutions because, in serving a younger population, they have less lead time to prepare for changes in the complexion of society. Young people in today's world face a barrage of challenges and stresses that may prevent them from attaining their full academic potential. A large number of children arrive at school mentally or emotionally unprepared to learn what is being taught. Some have been abused or neglected, others lack English proficiency, and still others come from families that have no home or are forced to live in unsafe neighborhoods. Pregnant teens, teen parents, and youth with drug or alcohol problems are at high risk of school failure or dropping out. These factors are presented in their own sections: social and economic context, racial/ethnic diversity, linguistic diversity, changing family patterns, poverty, homelessness, teen pregnancy, availability of drugs and alcohol, violence and school safety, factors that inhibit risky student behavior, and demographic planning. (RT)

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Social and Economic Context.
Trends and Issues

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Social and Economic Context

The United States is undergoing rapid social, economic, and demographic changes. Although the effects of these trends ripple through all social institutions, schools are especially sensitive to such shifts. Schools, which serve a younger population, are at a disadvantage compared to most other social institutions because they have less lead time to prepare for changes in the complexion of society.

Young people in today's world face a barrage of challenges and stresses that may prevent them from attaining their full academic potential. Each day a large number of children arrive at school mentally or emotionally unprepared to learn what is being taught. A

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wide range of factors can place young people at risk for persistent patterns of underachievement or social maladjustment.

Some children were affected while still in the womb by alcohol or other drugs used by their pregnant mothers. Others have been abused or neglected. Gnawing hunger and medical problems make it difficult for some students to focus on what's occurring in the classroom. Many immigrants are at risk for educational problems because they lack proficiency in English.

Still other children, particularly members of ethnic and racial minority groups, may feel caught between two distinctly different cultures. Some children grow up in families who have no homes at all or in families who, because of limited income, are forced to live in unsafe neighborhoods where the security most people associate with home is absent.

Pregnant teens and teen parents also have a high risk of school failure or dropping out, as do youth with drug or alcohol problems. Increasingly, students also fear and have a sense of vulnerability about violence being directed toward them by other young people. These are just a few of the social and economic problems that can be barriers to the educational success of children and young people.

Compiled by Linda Lumsden, editor, and Elizabeth Coffey, freelance research analyst and writer.

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Racial/Ethnic Diversity

Racial and ethnic diversity has been increasing in the U.S. during the past two decades. It is projected that minority students will comprise an increasing larger share of the school-age population in the years to come (Beth Young and Thomas Smith, *The Condition of Education 1997*). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1999, 38 percent of public school students were considered to be a part of a minority group, an increase of 16 percentage points from 1972" (Wirt and others 2001). Of the total public school enrollment, 16.5 percent were black and 16.2 percent were Hispanic.

Because economic and social conditions vary widely from place to place, specific national trends have more relevance for some districts than for others. Nevertheless, it is useful for educators to be aware of both national and local demographic changes. At the national level, ethnic diversity is increasing as is the percentage of children whose first language is not English. In some parts of the U.S., nonwhites are rapidly approaching or have already reached majority status. Between 1980 and 1990, the white population in the U.S. increased by 8 percent, while the African-American population increased by 16 percent, the Hispanic population by 44 percent, and Asians and others by 65 percent (Hodgkinson 1991).

The youngest segment of the American population is the most diverse. Whereas 26 percent of the total American population is nonwhite, 37 percent of school-age children are nonwhite (Harold Hodgkinson 1998).

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By 2025, Harold Hodgkinson predicts, half of all school children will be non-Anglo-American (2000). In contrast, it will take until 2050 before half of all Americans will be non-Anglo-American. Less than 15 percent of the immigration into the U.S. consists of people coming from Europe. According to Hodgkinson, "Almost a million immigrants come to the United States each year, mostly from Asia and South and Central America."

As racial and ethnic diversity grows and the number and proportion of children being raised in poverty continues to climb, schools must ensure that all students are taught at high levels by competent teachers who have access to a wide range of instructional resources. Unfortunately, this does not always happen. According to a survey by the federal Education Department, only one in five public school teachers said they felt prepared to address the needs of students whose knowledge of English was limited, or who came from diverse cultural backgrounds (Olson, September 27, 2000).

There is substantial evidence that when poor and minority students are taught at high levels, they respond and make gains. The achievement of minority students rose significantly between 1970 and 1988, substantially narrowing the achievement gap between whites and minorities. During this period, the performance gap between whites and blacks was reduced by half, and the gap between whites and Hispanics by one-third. To some extent this progress may be attributed to changes in family characteristics during this eighteen-year period. The education level of black parents rose, black families became smaller, and the percentage of black families living in poverty declined, all factors associated with higher student test scores.

However, teachers and schools can take credit for about two-thirds of the gains made by minorities during this period, states David Grissmer, a senior research scientist at the RAND Corporation (Olson). Such things as school desegregation, federal programs designed to boost reading and math skills of disadvantaged students, and greater public spending on education all probably played a part in boosting the academic progress of minority students (Olson).

Unfortunately, this progress has stopped and the performance gap is once again widening, reports *Quality Counts*, a report from the Education Trust, a

nonprofit organization whose goal is to close the performance gap between poor and minority children and their more advantaged—and often white—peers.

In many schools, poor and minority children are often given "dumbed down" curriculum rather than exposed to more challenging course content. Low-income and minority students tend to be overrepresented in special-education, vocational-education, and general-education programs and underrepresented in college-prep tracks.

In schools where at least 30 percent of the students are poor, teachers report a dearth of books and other reading materials. Only 16 percent of teachers in more affluent schools identify a lack of books and reading resources as a problem (Olson, *Education Week* website).

In schools where minority groups comprise the majority of the student population, teachers have less expertise in the subjects they teach compared to teachers in schools where minority enrollment is low. For example, in the 1990-91 school year, only 42 percent of high school math classes in schools with a majority of minorities were taught by teachers who had majored in math. In contrast, in schools where minorities made up less than 15 percent of the student population, 69 percent of the math classes were taught by math majors.

In its report *Education Watch: The 1996 Education Trust State and National Data Book*, the Education Trust notes that although poor and minority students can excel when expectations for them are high and content is challenging, "most schools don't teach all students at the same high level. In fact, we have constructed an educational system so full of inequities that it actually exacerbates the challenges of race and poverty, rather than ameliorates them. Simply put, we take students who have less to begin with and give them less in school, too" (Olson).

Title I/Chapter 1 is one program that strives to change the educational system by giving students with less more. While the aim of the federal compensatory education program for disadvantaged K-12 students is laudatory—to close the learning gap between Title I students and their peers—the results, until recently, have been less than satisfactory. A 1997 study by the U.S. Department of Education concluded that Chapter 1

had, in fact, failed (Kelly 1997).

Critics of the program say that the problem lies not with the teachers—whom Kelly categorizes as unusually good—but with the structure of the program itself. Kelly argues that the hour and a half Chapter 1 students spend weekly in a program designed to meet their needs is not adequate. "While the hours spent in compensatory education might be highly effective time for these students, 96 percent of their time is unaffected, still unproductive, frustrating, and defeating."

Palmer argues that highly qualified Chapter 1 teachers are being used as teacher's aides to help students complete daily assignments, which she likens to "using surgeons as hospital orderlies." Instead Chapter 1 classes should focus on helping students develop skills to catch up to their peers, not just keep up (Palmer 1997).

Title I, Chapter 1's successor, is striving to solve the problems which made Chapter 1 unsuccessful. State directors of the program say they are redirecting their efforts away from remedial education and are setting higher standards instead. States are moving to end the idea that Title I should be separate from the school day. In a study by the National Association of State Title I Directors, state directors expressed optimism that the program would be successful in the long run. Seventeen percent of survey respondents believe that the revised Title I program will narrow the achievement gap between Title I students in less than five years, while 19 percent say the gap will be closed within ten years (Hoff).

"We're headed in the right direction," Mary Jean LeTendre, Title I director for the Department of Education is quoted as saying. "The steps were faltering at first. They're getting surer and surer."

As more attention is drawn to the problems and successes of Title I, perhaps more attention will be given to the plight of minority students who are struggling to achieve against many odds.

"The fact that progress in minority achievement has stopped at a time when minorities comprise a growing portion of the student population should sound a wake-up call to the whole country. For while virtually all

minority students master basic skills by age 17, disproportionately few master the higher-level skills they need to assume productive roles in society" (Olson).

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Linguistic Diversity

Along with increasing racial/ethnic diversity comes increasing linguistic diversity. Both the number and the percentage of children who have difficulty speaking English have risen in recent years. Between 1979 and 1999, the proportion of limited-English-proficient children rose from 2.8 percent to 5 percent (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2001).

Immigrant children and the children of immigrants most often speak a non-English language. A much greater proportion of Hispanic children have difficulty speaking English than do black or white children. In 1999, a language other than English was spoken at home by 23 percent of Hispanic children, compared with 1 percent of both black and white children (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics).

To appropriately serve children who are not fluent in English, schools are required by law to provide services to address this language barrier. Some schools offer bilingual education, where instruction in core subjects is offered in the students' native language while they begin to learn English. Other schools provide students with English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. Still other schools offer both types of programs.

As the cultural makeup of society becomes more diverse, educators must become familiar with a variety of cultures and grasp both the advantages and challenges that accompany serving a more diverse student population. Teachers and administrators must

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create multicultural environments in which students from a wide array of backgrounds feel academically challenged as well as personally accepted and supported.

Schools must also continue to recruit minority teachers and administrators who can serve as role models for students from diverse backgrounds and help foster high educational and professional goals among minority students.

Although awareness of the blessings and challenges associated with increasing diversity is growing among school personnel, much remains to be done to ensure that all students feel equally welcome and equally intellectually stimulated in our public schools.

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Changing Family Patterns

All forms of "atypical" families are becoming more prevalent, while what used to be considered a "typical" family (consisting of a married couple and children) continues to decline. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, single-mother families increased from 3 million in 1970 to 10 million in 2000 (Field and Casper 2001). In addition, while there were only 393,000 single-father households in 1970, in 2000, that number increased to 2 million.

Other statistics from 1996 U.S. census data that shed light on family and household composition include the following:

- Married couples with their own children under age 18 accounted for 25 percent of all households.
- Thirty-two percent of all family groups with children were single-parent situations.
- People living alone made up 25 percent of all households.

Today, nearly half of all American children will spend some of their childhood or adolescence being raised by single parents. According to Beth Aronstamm Young and Thomas M. Smith (1997), "The proportion of children living in single-parent families has more than doubled since 1970." The increase in single-parent families translates into more children growing up in poverty (the topic of the next section). For several reasons, living in poverty is correlated with lower educational performance and attainment.

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In 2000, 77 percent of white, non-Hispanic children lived with two parents, while only 38 percent of black children and 65 percent of children of Hispanic origin did the same (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics). Of all the children living in homes headed by single mothers, 69.6 percent live in poverty (Colker).

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Poverty

The ranks of the poor in our nation have risen markedly in recent years. Every 44 seconds, a child is born into poverty. Children from low-income families are one and a half to three times more likely to die in childhood (The Children's Defense Fund 2001).

The rate of child poverty in the U.S. is two to nine times higher than it is in every other industrialized country (The Chldren's Defense Fund). And among countries for which data are available, "the U.S. is the only wealthy industrialized country to have double-digit child poverty rates... after adjusting for taxes and governmental transfers" (Young and Smith).

Myths persist about who compose the poor in America. Contrary to what many people assume, the majority of poor children come from families with working parents. In fact, the working poor outnumber those on welfare by two to one (Colker). Also most poor children live in rural and suburban areas, not in innercities (Colker).

For each year that children live in poverty, the likelihood that they will perform below grade level increases by 2 percent (Reeves 1988). And if a child attends a school that enrolls a large percentage of low-income students, the likelihood of failure in school rises dramatically. From the beginning, many poor children have several strikes against them. For example, poor mothers often receive little or no prenatal care and are more likely to have low-birth-weight babies. In poor families, the diet and medical care of children are often inadequate, which impairs their ability to be attentive

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and responsive in school.

Children in low-income families are also more likely to be ill in their early years and are more prone to sensory-motor deficits. In addition, children growing up in poverty often have fewer opportunities for socialization.

Poverty, not minority status, seems to be the most reliable predictor of below-average educational performance. A child who is a member of a minority group and whose parents are college graduates living in the suburbs tends to perform roughly the same academically as a white student who is a child of parents with comparable socioeconomic status and educational levels (Hodgkinson 1992). Therefore, if the proportion of minority students living in poverty could be reduced, we would expect to see a corresponding increase in educational performance among minority students.

One reason children in poverty perform less well in school than students in wealthier families is that some teachers expect less from students living in poverty than from students who come from more economically enriched backgrounds. Teachers must not lower their standards or reduce their expectations for students living in families that are not financially well off. To expect less of such students is to shortchange them and, in many cases, to cause them to lower their sights for themselves (Colker).

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Homelessness

In 1998, more than 615,336 school-age American children were homeless (National Center for Homeless Education 2001). These children typically lag behind their same-age classmates developmentally as well as academically.

Living at a shelter instead of in one's own home obviously places a strain on all family members. Being without a home creates instability, uncertainty, and stress. Residing at a shelter can create school-enrollment barriers for children. Although students may legally be permitted to continue attending the school they attended before becoming homeless, logistically this may not be feasible. Families may be forced to choose between transporting their children long distances to a former school or transplanting their children to a new school that is closer to where they are staying.

In addition to logistical barriers, a host of other factors impede homeless children's pursuit of education. According to Nunez and Collignon, homeless children are often left out of long-term class projects. They are subjected to ridicule by peers concerning their homeless status. And they are three times more likely than their nonhomeless peers to be recommended for special-education services (Nunez 1996). Once referred, many of these children never escape the special-education label and are maintained in special-education programs for the remainder of the public education (Nunez).

Parents of homeless children are most often single

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mothers with one or two children. The average homeless parent reads "at or below a 6th grade level and left school by the 10th grade" (Nunez and Collignon). Many of these parents are not in a position to provide significant academic support and assistance to their children, particularly when faced with a multitude of immediate crises related to their homeless status.

Schools must work in concert with homeless shelters and other social-service agencies to build what Nunez and Collignon refer to as either school- or shelter-based "communities of learning" that should include the following elements:

- specialized education for homeless children
- contextualized education for parents
- linkages to needed services

One way schools can build "communities of learning" is by studying the model of full-service schools. Full-service schools integrate education, medical, social and/or human services that help meet the needs of children and their families on school grounds. While the concept of full-service schools originated 25 years ago, the idea has taken off in the 90's with this decade's increased emphasis on more comprehensive and coordinated approaches to education (Raham 1998).

Sample programs offered by full-service schools include adult education, school meals, ESL, preschool and child care services, employment centers for parents and youth, health services for students and their families, anti-drug programs, training for parent volunteers, and home visits (Raham).

Full-service schools exist around the country in increasing numbers and offer up positive results. The Vaughn Family Center, a part of the Vaughn Next Century Learning Center, a public charter school in a barrio outside LA, is just one of full-service schools' success stories. Many of the students are from single-parent households, and their parents do not have a high school education. Ninety-five percent of students are recipients of breakfast and lunch programs. The Center provides social and educational services to parents, giving them the resources and confidence to become more involved in their children's education. After the creation of the Vaughn Family Center, achievement scores rose from the lowest in the state to near the state

average. In the first year alone, reading scores rose from the 9th to the 36th percentile and math scores rose from the 14th to the 57th. Attendance skyrocketed (Raham).

Raham argues that full-service schools provide necessary services for many disadvantaged children. "Efficient integration of resources and services through the school prevents duplication, disjointed programs, and stop-gap solutions that do not address the needs of the whole child."

Communication and collaboration are hallmarks of successful programs for homeless children. By first becoming informed about the needs of homeless children and families, making a commitment to play a part in more than a child's academic well-being, and collaborating with homeless shelters and other social-service agencies, educators can make headway toward the goal of better serving the needs of homeless children.

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Teen Pregnancy

Childbearing by teens has become a pressing problem. Each year, approximately 500,000 U.S. teens give birth. According to the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, the U.S. birth rate was 29 for teenage live births per 1,000 women aged 15 to 17 years, 2 percent lower than in 1997, and 1 percent lower than in 1991, when the rate reached its most recent peak.

Although current teen pregnancy rates reverse the 24 percent increase that occurred between 1986 and 1991, these rates are higher than they were in the early to mid-1980s, when the teen birth rate was at an all-time low—between 50 and 53 births per thousand teens age 15-19.

Most of the teens giving birth "are unmarried and are not ready for the emotional, psychological, and financial responsibilities and challenges of parenthood" (National Center for Health Statistics 1998).

Teen mothers are "much less likely than older women to receive timely prenatal care, are more likely to smoke and less likely to gain the recommended weight during their pregnancy, and more likely to have a low birth-weight infant (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).

Most teen mothers also "live in poverty, have dropped out of school and are unemployed" (Colker). In addition, between half and two-thirds of all female dropouts cite pregnancy as their principal reason for leaving school (Colker).

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According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Nearly two-thirds of births to teenagers (65 percent) were unintended when they were conceived, compared with 31 percent of births to women of all ages." The department also reported that "teenage wives face a much higher risk of separation and divorce than women who wait longer to marry: 47 percent of women who married before age 18 saw their marriages dissolve within 10 years, compared with 19 percent of women who married at age 23 or older."

Teen pregnancy has a negative effect on both quality of education and educational completion rates among teens who are pregnant or who have given birth to a child.

Over the past thirty years, schools have been slow to respond to the crisis of teenage pregnancy. Some problems that interfere with pregnant teens being served appropriately by the schools include failure of teachers and administrators to view teen pregnancy as a dropout issue, lack of effort to reach teen fathers, and lack of scheduling flexibility to accommodate pregnant teens' need to receive medical attention (Colker).

Some ways schools can help teen parents to break the cycle of poverty and unemployment include offering teen parents training in life skills, career awareness, and job skills (Colker).

Schools can lower the dropout rate among teen mothers by offering school-based child care so teen mothers can continue attending school. The Teen Parenting Program, which combines individualized academic and parenting instruction, claims to reduce future costs to society by lowering the school dropout rate for pregnant mothers from 80 percent to 38 percent and reducing the second-pregnancy rate from between 30 and 45 percent down to 8 percent. In addition, the program takes credit for successfully increasing birth weights of babies born to program participants.

Another school-based program, the Parent-Infant Care Center, provided child care for infants so their teen parents could remain in school (Reynolds 1995). During the three-month implementation of this practicum project, interventions at the center addressed teen parents' lack of knowledge, experience, and skills needed to provide appropriate care for their infants. Biweekly peer-support groups were held to address

issues related to parenting, employability, life-management skills, and child development. The program sought to increase parents' knowledge of resources, enhance their interpersonal relationships, and enhance their parenting skills. Data collected at the beginning and end of the implementation period showed an increase in teen mothers' (1) knowledge of community resources, (2) sense of support from significant adults, and (3) sensitivity to their infant's development. In addition, the physical well-being of the infants of participating mothers improved, as indicated by an increase in "wellness" appointments and completion of immunizations (Reynolds).

Programs such as these, that offer both traditional instruction and education in parenting and job skills, along with providing adult support and child care for the infants of teen mothers who are in school, can help raise the life quality of both young mothers and their children.

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Availability of Drugs and Alcohol

In a national survey released in February 2001 by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, students reported that it is easier to obtain illegal drugs on school grounds than in their own neighborhoods. Titled "National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse VI: Teens," the survey polled 1,000 teens age 12 to 17. Sixty-one percent of teens in high school who responded said that drugs were used, kept, or sold at their school.

According to "Back to School 1997–National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse III: Teens and Their Parents, Teachers, and Principals," teens said drugs are commonplace in their schools, but administrators and teachers were often unaware of, or hesitant to acknowledge, the problem. Only 12 percent of teachers and 14 percent of principals who participated in the survey said they had seen drug dealing at their school (Portner). In addition, 73 percent of principals identified their schools as being drug-free, while only 36 percent of teens believed their schools to be drug-free.

In fact, a full 35 percent of the teens polled in this survey identified illegal drug use at school as the biggest problem they face (Portner).

Another interesting finding: While only 24 percent of students reported that using marijuana on the weekend would have no detrimental effect on their grades, half the high school teachers and 41 percent of the middle-school teachers said they believed teens could smoke

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marijuana every weekend and still do well in school (Portner). In other words, of those polled, a far greater proportion of students than teachers believed weekend use of marijuana had the potential to adversely affect their academic performance.

Although the teachers, administrators, and students who were surveyed disagreed about the magnitude and severity of the problem of illegal drugs, a large percentage of all three groups advocated taking tough steps to rid schools of drugs. Half the students and principals supported drug testing, and a majority of students, teachers, principals, and parents supported random locker searches and zero-tolerance drug policies.

A report by the National Center for Education Statistics also provides information on students' perceptions of the availability of drugs at school. The 1995 data collected for this comparative survey, "Students' Reports of School Crime: 1989 and 1995," found that 65.3 percent of students reported marijuana, cocaine, crack, or uppers and downers were available at school. The 1995 figures were slightly higher than those in 1989, when 63.2 percent of student respondents said those drugs were available at their school.

With increasing availability of drugs at school, it is not surprising that drug use is on the rise as well. While illegal drug use for high school seniors fell dramatically during the 1980's and early 1990's, it has begun to rise again. A report from The Condition of Education 1997 found that while high school seniors' use of cocaine fell from 12 percent in 1981 to 3 percent in 1992, it increased to 5 percent in 1996. Similarly, marijuana use, down to 22 percent in 1992, shot up to 36 percent in 1996.

Consumption of alcohol is another issue that places youth at risk. Underage drinking is not limited to high school. In 1995, 45 percent of 8th graders reported consuming alcohol within in the past year, and 26 percent had used alcohol in the previous 30 days in 1996 (The Condition of Education 1997). In 1996, 73 percent of high school seniors reported they drank alcohol during the previous year. Half of seniors--51 percent--reported using alcohol within the last 30 days (The Condition of Education 1997).

This high use of alcohol among youth can have dangerous consequences. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reports that "the younger the age of drinking onset, the greater the chance that an individual at some point in life will develop a clinically defined alcohol disorder. Young people who began drinking before age 15 were four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence (alcohol addiction, commonly known as alcoholism) than those who began drinking at age 21, researchers found. The risk that a person would develop alcohol abuse (a maladaptive drinking pattern that repeatedly causes life problems) was more than doubled for persons who began drinking before age 15 compared with those who began drinking at age 21 NIAAA)

"This study adds new evidence about the need to regard underage drinking as the serious problem it is," said HHS Secretary Donna E. Shalala. "Parents, schools, and communities need to say to our young people with one voice that underage drinking can jeopardize health and lifetime prospects."

Cigarette smoking likewise continues to be a problem among teens, though the rate of teens that smoke may be declining. The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics reports that between 1999 and 2000, the rate of daily smoking in the past 30 days decreased from 23 percent to 21 percent among 12^{th}-graders and from 16 percent to 14 percent among 10^{th}-graders.

If students are to have the best opportunity to attain their academic and personal potential, schools must continue to be vigilant in their efforts to educate students about potential risks of drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes, attempt to eliminate illegal drugs from their schools, and provide assistance and referrals to students who have substance-abuse problems.

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Violence and School Safety

While the NCES reports that the number of students being victimized at school in the past few years has declined, in 1999 students ages 12 through 18 were still victims of about 2.5 million total crimes at school (Kaufman and others 2001). Of those crimes, 186,000 were serious violent crimes (rape, sexual assault, robbery, or aggravated assault).

According to a representative sample of 50,000 teachers polled by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), students' disrespect for teachers is increasing. Compared with similar polls administered in 1987-88 and 1990-91, the 1993-94 NCES survey found a greater percentage of teachers perceive verbal abuse of teachers as a serious or moderately serious problem, compared to the two previous surveys.

In addition, a study released in October 2001, which was conducted jointly by the Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics, reports students' perspectives on how violence and crime in the schools has changed between 1995 and 1999. This study, which surveyed students at two different points in time, provides data on what proportion of public- and private-school students report being victimized at school. The data also illuminate students' perspectives on the various conditions in their schools.

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National indicators affirm that the levels of crime in school have continued to decline and that students feel

safer in school than they did a few years ago (Kaufman and others). The percentage of students in grades 9 through 12 who have been victims of serious violent acts at school has not changed significantly in recent years. The percentage of students who reported gangs being present in their schools had fallen from 29 percent in 1995 to 17 percent in 1999.

The NCES survey also included a series of questions about the presence of guns at school. Between 1993 and 1999, the percentage of students who reported carrying a weapon to school within the previous 30 days fell from 12 to 7 percent.

Steps being taken by schools to try to curb violence and ensure that schools are safe havens for students include offering violence prevention or reduction programs, instituting zero-tolerance programs toward weapons and violence, and requiring students to wear uniforms.

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Factors That Inhibit Risky Student Behavior

The largest, most comprehensive survey of adolescents ever undertaken in the United States provides a blueprint regarding what factors tend to protect kids from engaging in harmful behaviors. Congressionally mandated and federally funded, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) was conducted by researchers at the University of Minnesota and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The study was conducted in three phases. Approximately 90,000 students in grades 7 through 12 from 145 schools across the country participated in phase one. In this phase students answered brief questionnaires that polled them about themselves and their lives, including their health, friendships, self-esteem, and expectations for the future.

In the second phase, about 20,000 students and their parents were interviewed in their homes. The final phase of the study–not yet reported–repeated the interviews a year later. The effects of gender, race, ethnicity, family structure, and poverty status were controlled for by the researchers.

Preliminary analysis of the Add Health survey indicates that "a feeling of personal connection to home, family and school is crucial for protecting young people from a vast array of risky behaviors, such as cigarette, alcohol, and marijuana use, violent behavior, suicide, and sexual activity."

Major findings of the study include the following:

- *Home environment and illicit substances*–The mere

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presence of drugs, alcohol, or tobacco in the home increases the likelihood of adolescents using these substances and of engaging in risky behaviors. Alcohol was readily available in over a quarter (27.8 percent) of respondents' homes. One in three adolescents reported that cigarettes were easily available in the home.

"The home environment plays a major role in shaping negative health outcomes among adolescents," said Michael Resnick, lead author of an article published in the Journal of the American Medical Association about the study and professor of Maternal and Child Health and Pediatrics at the University of Minnesota. "When adolescents do not have access to alcohol and drugs in their homes, they are less likely to use them."

- *Guns and Violence*–Similarly, adolescents living in homes where guns are kept are more likely to be involved in violent behavior and more likely to attempt or contemplate suicide. Add Health data show that a significant number of children across America–almost one quarter of those surveyed in this study–have easy access to guns at home. Over 12 percent of those interviewed indicated that they had carried a weapon during the previous 30 days. Fully one quarter of those interviewed reported that they had been a victim of violent behavior.
- *School*–Students' feeling of connectedness to school–that is their feelings that teachers treat students fairly, that they feel close to people at school and that they are a part of school–is protective against every health-risk behavior examined. Health behaviors and outcomes, as a rule, were not related to structural characteristics of schools–how big the school is, the teacher-student ratio, teaching experience, and the grade range of the school.

  The Condition of Education 1997 report further confirms Add Health's conclusions--students who are more involved in school are less likely to engage in risky behavior. Their report states that students who planned to complete four or more years of college were less likely to report alcohol, marijuana, or cocaine use in the past year than those with no plans to continue their education.

- *Sex*–Adolescents who report a sense of connectedness to parents, family, and school, and who have a higher grade-point average are more likely than their peers to

delay having sexual intercourse. Adolescents who delay first intercourse are also more likely to have taken a pledge to remain virgins until they are married and to report that their parents disapprove of them having sex and using contraception.

Compared with those who have been pregnant, sexually experienced girls who have not been pregnant are more likely to have delayed their first age of intercourse, to have used effective contraception at both their first and most recent intercourse, to perceive negative consequences of becoming pregnant, and to report being more involved in activities with their parents.

"If parents don't want their teenagers to have sex, they should make sure their teenagers understand and hear loud and clear that they don't want them to have sex," said Resnick. "But if these kids are having sex, our study confirms the benefits of contraception."

- *Students who are out of 'synch'*–The survey found that adolescents who physically appear either older or younger than their peers are more likely to experience negative health outcomes. Seventh and eighth graders who felt they looked younger than their peers reported experiencing more emotional distress than did their peers. Repeating a grade or appearing older than classmates predisposed adolescents to depression, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts, violence, substance use, and earlier age of sexual activity.

  "The problem of school failure is all the more critical when one realizes that more than one in five young people have been held back at least one year in school," said

  Robert Blum, professor and director of Minnesota's Adolescent Health Program and a study co-investigator. "Academic success is protective against many health risks, and school failure is strongly associated with nearly all risk behaviors."

- *Religion*–Among the nearly 85 percent of those surveyed who reported having a religion, the perceived importance of religion and prayer was protective. Those who said religion and prayer were important to them tended to have a later age of sexual debut and were also less likely to use all substances. (Add Health

website:
http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth/home.html)

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Demographic Planning

Before engaging in long-range planning, more school administrators are seeing the necessity of monitoring national demographic trends and collecting and analyzing local demographic data to obtain a glimpse of how their districts are likely to be affected by population-related changes and other social and economic trends. Districts that take the time to collect and analyze demographic data will be better equipped to restructure their educational programs to meet the needs of a changing student population.

Thomas Glass (1987) contends that many school leaders are not aware of the wealth of demographic information at their disposal. Glass identifies several potential sources of "soft" demographic data. First, federal census data can provide educational planners with a good overview of a population and help administrators to draw conclusions about the population's likelihood of producing children who will attend local schools. Zoning information on land use and development proposals also has relevance for administrators and can be obtained from county planning departments; general population projections undertaken by county planners are also useful.

In addition, knowing the number of building permits issued by the city or county during a given year can give administrators a very rough idea about whether economic activity in a community is increasing or decreasing. Data on the number of live births among district residents, which can usually be obtained from county health departments, are also valuable.

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Studies conducted by large businesses, economic-development agencies, and organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce also often contain information of value to school districts. Such studies are often undertaken to acquire data about the labor force, the type of housing, and so forth.

Finally, educational planners may be able to glean useful information from utility companies, which conduct comprehensive surveys to estimate the number of hookups that will be needed in each section of a city or county during a specified ten-year span; in some cases, however, utilities keep these survey results confidential.

Glass suggests that one way to use these kinds of data is to weight them according to their ability to accurately project into the future, perhaps applying a rating scale from 1 to 5 to indicate each source's predictive value. He cautions that any effort to predict enrollment that is based on such data should be considered a "best guess."

Compiled by Linda Lumsden, editor.

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